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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to give a unified view of the workings of noun clauses. These are considered according to three main types corresponding to three different kinds of source sentences. All three types can be used in any usual noun-phrase function, especially subject, direct object, and prepositional object. Four factors which complicate the picture in French are the use of complementizers (adapters), extraposition (displacement) of the clause to the beginning or end of the sentence, the use of the subjunctive in the clause, and the special subordinating conjunctions required. It follows that any given noun clause can be classified by stating four parameters: the kind of source sentence, the function of the clause, the presence or absence of an adaptor, and the presence or absence of displacement. A brief teaching plan based on the preceding analysis concludes the paper. Appended are two sets of sentences which illustrate all the noun clause types. One of the sets consists exclusively of sentences found in novels, plays, and contemporary magazines and newspapers. (Author/AMH)

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TEACHING FRENCH NOUN-CLAUSES

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I. Introduction

I am convinced that noun clauses are badly taught--when they are taught at all. The main reason for this is that they are generally not recognized for what they are; that is, they are not understood as belonging to one single set of phenomena, but instead are fragmented into several. To give only one reference, in Grévisse, Le Bon Usage, which is easily the most compendious traditional grammar of French in existence, noun clauses are treated in two different non-contiguous chapters. One, called Le Discours Indirect, deals solely with one of the three main types of NCl, and not at all with the other two. In the other, Propositions Substantives, NCl's are given fairly good general coverage in the introduction, but: 1) reference is nonetheless made to "Interrogation Indirecte;" 2) one searches in vain for certain types of NCl's (in particular, those from questions) in certain functions (especially as object of preposition); and 3) one finds extraneous material--specifically, a treatment of Infinitive Phrase constructions--in the middle of the chapter, on a par with (and evidently thought of as a subtype of) noun clauses. Even generative-transformational works show much of the same confusion as traditional ones, with NCl's fragmented into several apparently unrelated parts of the treatment.

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On the supposition that the first step toward good teaching of grammar is good analysis of the structures to be taught, we will try to show in this paper how NCl's work, using an essentially generative-transformational approach but keeping in mind that they are all parts of one set of phenomena. Only at the end will we speak directly about teaching devices; but in fact, what we will be saying here is essentially what

we say in the classroom.

II. Analysis

A. The first of the two most important facts about NCl's is that they are of three main types, which correspond to three different kinds of source sentence. In generative-transformational grammar, any NCl is considered to be made from an EMBEDDED SENTENCE: one sentence which is contained within another. Thus the deep structure of sentence (1) Je ne savais pas que tu es né ici, is roughly as given just below it: Je ne savais pas [Tu es né ici]. (Incidentally, all my example sentences will be found on Handout I, exactly as they appear on the pad I am showing you.) That is, the embedded sentence Tu es né ici will become the NCl que tu es né ici in the finished (surface) sentence.

The embedded sentence may be a statement, as in sentence (1). But it may alternatively be a yes/no question or a QU-question, as illustrated in (2) and (3) respectively. In (2), Je ne savais pas si tu es né ici, the embedded sentence is the yes/no question Tu es né ici? And in (3), Je ne savais pas où tu es né, the embedded sentence is the QU-question Où tu es né? Usually, when the embedded sentence is a statement, the NCl is a que-clause; when the embedded sentence is a yes/no question, the resulting NCl is a si-clause; and when the embedded sentence is a QU-question, the NCl is a QU-word clause--in the example in (3), specifically, a clause with où.

B. The other most important single fact about NCl's is that, regardless of its type--that is, regardless of the kind of embedded sentence it is from--any NCl can basically be used in any of the normal NP functions; that is, can be used in any of the usual functions that noun-phrases are allowed to perform. The most usual functions of NP's are those of SUBJECT, of DIRECT OBJECT, and of OBJECT OF A PREPOSITION; and every one of those functions is frequently filled by a NCl--though the direct

object function is by far the most frequent of all. We illustrate with three sentences in which basically the same noun clause is used in those three different functions. In sentence (4), Qui a inventé la roue est inconnu, the NCl is the subject. In (5), On ne sait pas qui a inventé la roue, it is the direct object. And in (6), On n'écrit pas beaucoup de livres sur qui a inventé la roue, the noun clause is the object of the preposition sur. In (7), La question est qui a inventé la roue, it is in yet another function, one which is somewhat less frequent than those of subject, direct object, or object of a preposition--namely, that of the subject-completer (or predicate) after a linking verb such as être.

C. There are several more facts that complicate the picture somewhat. The first is that--in certain functions and with certain types of noun clause especially--French may prefer to use, or have to use, a complementizer, a sort of adaptor, usually a noun phrase or an infinitive. Sentences (8, 9, 10, 12) illustrate. While (7), La question est qui a inventé la roue, is perfectly grammatical, it is much less likely to occur in careful style than (8), with de savoir inserted: La question est de savoir qui a inventé la roue. (Strictly speaking, in (8) the noun clause has now become the direct object of savoir, whereas in (7) it was the subject-completer.) Similarly, (9), On n'écrit pas beaucoup de livres sur la question de savoir qui a inventé la roue, is much more likely than (6), On n'écrit pas beaucoup de livres sur qui a inventé la roue, which latter would be judged by many speakers to be awkward. In (10), Qu'elle dise la verité devrait maintenant être clair, there is no adaptor, but an alternative version with an adaptor is equally likely: Le fait qu'elle dise la vérité devrait maintenant être clair. And in (12), the adaptor is required: Nous parlions du fait que les temps changent. The alternative without any adaptor is completely ungrammatical:

*Nous parlions de que les temps changent. (Cf. the corresponding English sentences, (11) and (13), with obligatory adaptor. But there is no doubt whatever that French uses such adaptors much more frequently than English, and has a special partiality for la question de savoir.)

D. Another complicating factor is that we can shift the noun clause, just as we can any noun phrase, by a process that in generative grammar is called "extraposition" or "displacement," either to the left (i.e., to the beginning of the sentence) or to the right (to the end of the sentence). Compare sentence (4), Qui a inventé la roue est inconnu, without displacement, with (14), Qui a inventé la roue, cela est inconnu, in which leftward displacement has been applied, and with (15), C'est inconnu qui a inventé la roue, in which rightward displacement has operated. In each case an impersonal pronoun (cela, ça, ce, or il) takes the place of the displaced clause in the main clause. Or compare (1), Je ne savais pas que tu es né ici, without displacement, to (16), Que tu es né ici, je ne le savais pas, with leftward displacement, and to (17), Je ne le savais pas, que tu es né ici, with rightward displacement.

E. If we were to ring all the changes here we could end up with rather large numbers of variant sentences. Given the three basic types of noun clauses, each of which frequently enters into at least three functions, we have nine possible "basic" sentence types. If we now add the fact that for each of these basic sentence types a variation with leftward displacement and another variation with rightward displacement may be found, that means twenty-seven (i.e., 3 x 3 x 3) possible types, of which eighteen are variations with displacement. And finally, since in at least six or seven of these cases an adaptor may occur optionally, this means at least twenty-three or twenty-four different types and variations. All this does not include NCl's in less frequent functions such as subject-completer.

F. Still another complicating factor is that of mood and tense. (a) The subjonctif may be used, sometimes obligatorily and sometimes optionally, in que-clauses in all functions; for example, (10), (Le fait) Qu'elle dise la vérité devrait maintenant être clair. And (b) the tense, and certain pronouns and adverbs, may have to be shifted from what they were in the deep structure sentence to something different in the surface noun clause. Take, for example, (18), Il a dit qu'il partirait le lendemain. The deep structure from which that sentence comes is approximately Il; a dit [Je; partirai demain]. But these shifts represent hardly any problem at all for the English-speaking learner, since they are almost exactly the same as the shifts needed in English; compare (19): He said he would leave the next day, from He; said [I; will leave tomorrow].

G. One last complication has to do with the forms of the subordinating conjunctions (which I call "noun clause markers"). First, the interrogative expressions that mean "What?" (qu'est-ce qui?, que?, qu'est-ce que?, etc.) are replaced in the noun clause by ce qui, ce que, ce dont, etc.; these must be learned, and their functions gotten straight. And second, si is replaced by que (plus subjonctif) in certain functions. But these are details, rather than fundamental matters.

H. A given noun clause may be classed rather completely by stating four parameters: (1) which kind of source sentence it is from (statement, yes/no question, or information-question); (2) its function (subject, direct object, etc.); (3) whether or not an adaptor is present; and (4) whether or not displacement has taken place, and if so, which kind. For example, the fourth sentence in Handout II goes: Cela l'eût choqué qu'un officier...parlât de déposer les armes. Its noun clause can be classed as (1) from a source statement, (2) functioning as subject, (3) without any adaptor, but (4) with rightward displacement.

In Handout II, I have reproduced a series of authentic sentences containing noun clauses: authentic in the sense that they were not invented for my purpose here, but occurred spontaneously in various novels, plays, magazines, or newspapers. (Some I have second-hand through Grévisse.) They are arranged systematically according to type and function.

I hope it is clear from the examples how what at first view may appear to be a number of unrelated structures, governed by mysterious workings, seems to be to be analyzable into a fairly simple (and highly interesting) set of interconnected phenomena operating in fairly simple ways. From absolute chaos we have, I think, produced a certain modicum of order.

III. Teaching Noun Clauses

After considerable experimentation I have settled on a teaching plan that seems to work better (for me) than any other to date. It should come as no surprise that the plan follows quite closely the analysis I presented to you above. The plan is outlined below:

A. Introduction

a) Ask the student to spot the noun clause in a few typical sentences, especially those from information-questions.

b) Ask the student to pick out the noun-clause marker in a few typical noun clauses--especially those from QU-questions.

B. Introduce the three major <u>functions</u> of noun clauses, and show how the function of the NCl is the same as the function of the source sentence in the deep structure.

C. Present the three main <u>types</u> of noun clauses, tying these to the kind of source sentence.

Ask student to spot the function of the noun clause in some typical sentences.

Ask student to produce the noun clause in some French sentences (by translating from English).

D. Noun clauses up to this point are mostly from QU-questions, and mostly in the direct object function. We now move to noun clauses from yes/no questions, in the direct object function. Then we go on to those from QU-questions, still in the direct object function. A table and a summary follow.

E. We present the main details of noun clauses in the two other most frequent functions, with and without adaptors; and with or without displacement:

   1) object of preposition;

   2) subject.

F. The presentation concludes with a batch of practice sentences containing noun clauses of all frequent types and functions, and a quiz.

That is the arrangement I have incorporated into a programmed self-instructional "module" or "mini-course," which I use in my advanced French composition and grammar course and also in my French generative syntax course. (I have a small number of copies of the module here. If you would like to examine one, please feel free to come and do so after the session.) Thank you!

APPENDIXES

("Teaching French Noun-Clauses,"
E. Mayer, University of Colorado)

I. (1) Je ne savais pas que tu es né ici.
From: Je ne savais pas [Tu es né ici].
(2) Je ne savais pas si tu es né ici (ou non).
From: Je ne savais pas [Tu es né ici (, ou non)?].
(3) Je ne savais pas où tu es né.
From: Je ne savais pas [Où tu es né?].
(4) Qui a inventé la roue est inconnu.
(5) On ne sait pas qui a inventé la roue.
(6) On n'écrit pas beaucoup de livres sur qui a inventé la roue.
(7) La question est qui a inventé la roue.
(8) La question est de savoir qui a inventé la roue.
(9) On n'écrit pas beaucoup de livres sur la question de savoir qui a inventé la roue.
(10) Qu'elle (~Le fait qu'elle) dise la vérité devrait maintenant être clair.
(11) That (~The fact that) she is telling the truth should be clear now.
(12) Nous parlions du fait que (*de que) les temps changent.
(13) We were talking about the fact that (*about that) times change.
(14) Qui a inventé la roue, cela est inconnu.
(15) C'est inconnu qui a inventé la roue.
(16) Que tu es né ici, je ne le savais pas.
(17) Je ne le savais pas, que tu es né ici.
(18) Il a dit qu'il partirait le lendemain.
From: Il_i a dit [Je_i partirai demain].
(19) He said he would leave the next day.
From: He_i said [I_i will leave tomorrow].

II. "Authentic" examples

EMBEDDED STATEMENT

SUBJECT -Que Jacques fût vivant ne le surprenait guère. [R. Martin du Gard]
-Le fait que deux segments linguistiques soient juxtaposés dans la phrase n'entraîne pas nécessairement qu'ils soient pertinents l'un par rapport à l'autre. [J. LeGalliot]
-Que la droite démolisse l'enseignement publique, cela n'est pas nouveau. [Nouvel Observateur]
-Cela l'eût choqué qu'un officier...parlât de déposer les armes. [R.Dorgelès]

DO -Tout le monde sait que les socialistes luttent pour l'égalité. [Express]
-Je veux qu'on soit sincère. [Molière]
-Qu'elle l'aimait, il le savait depuis longtemps. [A. Billy]
-Il le savait bien avant tous que la pièce était reçue. [A. Daudet]

OBJ PREP -M. de Malesherbes tenait à ce que Jean-Baptiste partît avec François. [A. Maurois]
-Qu'on puisse agir sur lui par cette crainte, Napoléon en est certain. [J. Bainville]

SC -L'essentiel est qu'on vient à votre secours. [R. Rolland.]
-Ma crainte était que...Catherine se fût lassée... [A. France]
-Ce que j'aime en lui, c'est...le fait qu'il sache qu'il veut. [Paris-Match]

EMBEDDED YES/NO Q

SUBJECT -La question de savoir si nous allons continuer à geler les prix... n'a pas encore été débattue entre nous. [Nouvel Observateur]

DO -Vous pensez si j'étais rouge et si j'avais peur! [A. Daudet]
-Je me suis souvent demandé si j'aurais jamais eu un succès quelconque...sans l'influence de ma mère. [Express]

OBJ PREP -Une controverse a surgi sur le point de savoir si cette "libéralisation" s'applique seulement aux enfants légitimes ou non... [Nouvel Observateur]
-Je ne m'occupe pas de savoir s'ils sont sincères ou non... [Express]

SC -La question...était bien de savoir si l'on était pour ou contre l'arrivée des communistes au pouvoir. [Nouvel Observateur]

EMBEDDED QU-QUESTION

SUBJECT -Tous les éléments étaient réunis pour qu'ait lieu ce que l'architecte Frank Lloyd Wright appelait "la course entre l'ascenseur et l'automobile." [Monde]
-Peu importe sur qui tombera le sort. [Académie]
-Ce qu'il voulait..., c'était garder la parole le plus possible,...
-Il m'est fort indifférent quel jugement vous en portiez. [Académie]

DO -Tu sais combien je hais leurs fêtes criminelles. [Racine]
-La Nasa doit décider...quelle sera la prochaine étape de l'exploration de la planète Mars. [Monde]
-Les bourgeois de Chicago...disputaient le point de savoir quelle était la meilleure des deux écoles de danse de la ville. [Monde]
-Ce qu'il y a de meilleur dans mon métier, je l'ai appris à Londres... [Express]

OBJ PREP -...les dirigeants du parti communiste français s'interrogeaient... sur le point de savoir si le moment est bien choisi pour aller vers une telle expérience,... [Nouvel Observateur]

SC -La vraie question est de savoir comment on veut organiser la transition au socialisme. [Nouvel Observateur]
-C'est pourtant ce que nous ferons. [Express]